

# What Can We Learn from Political Theory? (1942)

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The title of this lecture is not entirely of my own choosing.<sup>25</sup> I do not like very much the term political *theory*;<sup>26</sup> I would prefer to speak of political *philosophy*. Since this terminological question is not entirely verbal, I beg leave to say a few words about it.

The term political theory implies that there is such a thing as *theoretical* knowledge of things *political*. This implication is by no means self-evident. Formerly,<sup>27</sup> *all* political knowledge was considered *practical* knowledge, and *not* theoretical knowledge. I recall the traditional division of the sciences into theoretical and practical sciences. According to that division,<sup>28</sup> political philosophy, or political science, together with ethics and economics, belongs to the practical sciences, just as mathematics and the natural sciences belong to the theoretical sciences. Whoever uses the term political theory tacitly denies that traditional distinction. That denial means one of these two things or both of them: (1) the denial of the distinction between theoretical and practical sciences: *all* science is ultimately *practical* (*scientia propter potentiam*); (2) the basis of *all* reasonable practice is pure theory.<sup>b</sup> A purely theoretical, detached knowledge of things political is the safest guide for political action, just as a purely theoretical, detached knowledge of things physical is the safest guide toward conquest of nature: this is the view underlying the very term political theory.

The term political theory has another important implication. According to present-day usage, theory is essentially different, not only from practice, but above all from *observation*. If a man is asked “How do you account for this or that event?” he may answer: “I have a theory,” or “A number of

<sup>a</sup> This lecture was transcribed and annotated by Nathan Tarcov. Steven Smith drew the lecture to his attention. The typescript can be found in the Leo Strauss Papers, box 6, folder 12, Special Collections, University of Chicago Library.

<sup>b</sup> The following handwritten note was added at the bottom of the page: Science, d'où prevoyance; prevoyance, d'où action (Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive*).

theories may be suggested”; sometimes one is asked: “What is *your*<sup>29</sup> theory?” What is meant by “theory” in such cases is the essentially *hypothetical* assertion of a *cause* of an observed fact. The assertion being essentially hypothetical, it<sup>30</sup> is essentially *arbitrary*: *my* theory. What is *seen*—Hitler’s rise to power, for example—is *not* a theory, but our differing *explanations* of Hitler’s rise to power are our *theories*. This use of the term theory is of fairly recent date. The original meaning of the Greek verb θεωρεῖν, with which “theory” is connected, is to be an envoy sent to consult an oracle, to present an offering, to be present at festivals,<sup>31</sup> to look at, to behold, to inspect, contemplate, consider, compare . . . ,<sup>a</sup> i.e., the original meaning of the term does not warrant at all the distinction of theory from observation; it rather excludes it; it certainly does not justify the identification, or almost identification, of theory with an essentially *hypothetical* kind of knowledge.

I have some misgivings as regards these two connotations of the term theory, which are, to repeat, (1) the implication that a purely theoretical discussion of political questions is possible, and (2) the view that political knowledge as a whole consists of observation of “data” and hypothetical explanation of these “data”; I prefer therefore the term political philosophy which does not imply these assumptions. By political philosophy, we understand the coherent reflection carried on by politically minded people concerning the essentials of political life as such, and the attempt to establish, on the basis of such reflection, the right standards of judgment concerning political institutions and actions; political philosophy is the attempt to discover *the* political truth. Accordingly, I would not speak of the political philosophy of Hitler, for example, Hitler being not interested in truth and relying on intuition rather than on methodic reflection. It is legitimate, however, to speak of the political *thought*, or of the political *ideas*, of the Nazis. All political philosophy is political thought, but not all political thought is political philosophy.<sup>32</sup> (E.g., the very terms “law” and “father” imply political thought, but not political philosophy. Political thought is as old as the human race, but political philosophy emerged at some definite time in the recorded past.) I think we owe it to philosophy that we do not use its noble name in vain.

I. I shall then discuss the question “What can we learn from political *philosophy*?” For the purpose of a summary discussion, it is advisable to

<sup>a</sup> Strauss takes these definitions from the entries for θεωρέω and θεωρός in *Greek-English Lexicon*, Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1941).

sketch first the arguments in favor of the negative. It seems as if we can learn *nothing* from political philosophy. For: (1) one may doubt whether there exists<sup>33</sup> such a thing deserving to be called political philosophy; (2) even if there were a political philosophy in existence, we would not need it; (3) even if we would need it, its lessons would necessarily be ineffectual.

1. There is *no* political philosophy, because there are *many* political philosophies; only one of them, if any, can be true; and certainly the layman does not know which is the true one. When we ask what can we learn from political philosophy, we mean, of course, what can we learn from the *true* political philosophy? We can learn nothing *from* the wrong political philosophies, although we may learn something *on the occasion* of them. The situation in political philosophy is not fundamentally different from that in the other branches of philosophy. Philosophy means the attempt, constantly renewed, to *find* the truth; the very term philosophy implies that we do *not possess* the truth. Philosophy is at best possession of clear knowledge of the *problems*—it is not possession of clear knowledge of the *solutions* to the problems. The basic questions in all branches of philosophy are as unsolved today as they were at all times; new questions have been raised from time to time; the interest has shifted from one type of questions to others; but the most fundamental, the truly philosophic questions remain unanswered. This is, of course, no objection to philosophy as such: but it *is* an objection to the expectation, or the claim, that philosophy is a safe guide for action. One may try, and people did try, to seclude from the realm of philosophy the questions which do not seem to permit of a universally acceptable answer, but in doing so, one is merely *evading* the questions, not answering them. I have been trying to remind you of that melancholy spectacle called the anarchy of the systems, a phenomenon which is almost as old as philosophy itself and which seems to have so profound roots in the nature of philosophy and of its objects that it is reasonable to expect that it will last as long as philosophy itself. That spectacle becomes perhaps even more melancholic if one considers political or social philosophy by itself.<sup>34</sup> One could take almost any fundamental question of political philosophy, and one could show that no answer exists which is universally accepted by honest seekers of the truth, to say nothing of the partisans of the various camps. (E.g., is justice of the essence of the State?)<sup>35</sup>

2. But even if we could be reasonably certain that a given political philosophy is the true political philosophy, one could say that one cannot learn anything important from it as far as political action is concerned. For that

kind of knowledge which is indispensable for reasonable political action is not philosophic knowledge: practical wisdom, common sense, horse sense, shrewd estimation of the situation, *these* are the intellectual qualities which make up the successful man of affairs: he does not require political philosophy for his guidance. I may refer to the story told in England of H. G. Wells meeting Winston Churchill and asking about the progress of the war. "We're getting along with our idea," said Churchill. "You have an idea?" asked Wells. "Yes," said Churchill, "along the lines of our general policy." "You have a general policy?" Wells persisted. "Yes," answered Churchill, "the K. M. T. policy." "And what is the K. M. T. policy?" asked Wells. "It is this," replied Churchill, "Keep Muddling Through." The fact that this muddling through led to disaster in the case of Singapore and Libya<sup>a</sup> is evidently not a proof of the necessity of political philosophy, considering that neither the Japanese generals<sup>b</sup> nor Rommel are political philosophers to speak of. I have not the slightest doubt as to the possibility of devising an intelligent international policy, for example, without having any recourse to political philosophy: that this war has to be won, that the only guarantee for a somewhat longer peace period after the war is won is a sincere Anglo-Saxon–Russian entente, that the Anglo-Saxon nations and the other nations interested in, or dependent on, Anglo-Saxon preponderance must not disarm nor relax in their armed vigilance, that you cannot throw power out of the window without facing the danger of the first gangster coming along taking it up, that the existence of civil liberties all over the world depends on Anglo-Saxon preponderance—to know these broad essentials of the situation, one does not need a single lesson in political philosophy. In fact, people adhering to fundamentally different political philosophies have reached these same conclusions.

<sup>a</sup> "Gallipoli" and "Egypt" crossed out and "Singapore" and "Libya" handwritten. Gallipoli in particular is known as "Churchill's folly": he tried to open a second front during World War I, which proved an ambitious disaster. The attack on Gallipoli began on the morning of February 19, 1915, and the Gallipoli Campaign lasted nine months before the evacuation in January 1916. Each side sustained 250,000 casualties. "Fortress Singapore" against Japanese invasion turned out to be a myth, with the city taken in 1941. Strauss may have changed Gallipoli to Singapore to stick to cases during World War II. Rommel's victory at Tobruk with the surrender of 35,000 Allied troops on June 21, 1942, lost Libya to the Axis, but Egypt was saved by the Allied victory at the First Battle of El Alamein in July. Strauss was keeping up with the progress of the war.

<sup>b</sup> "Tojo" was crossed out and "the Japanese generals" handwritten. Tojo was the prime minister of Japan during much of World War II, from October 17, 1941, to July 22, 1944.

3. But even if it were true that we could not find our bearings in the political world without being guided by political philosophy, i.e., by the one true political philosophy, the possibility would still remain that the orientation supplied by political philosophy would be ineffectual: political philosophy might teach us what should be done, and yet we might be certain that this knowledge would not have the slightest influence on the unpredictable course of events: a set of microbes killing Hitler may seem to have an infinitely greater political significance than the clearest and best demonstrated lesson in political philosophy. If we look at the whole course of the history of political philosophy, we seem to learn that “it is almost a law of the development of political thought that political conceptions are the by-product of actual political relations” (McIlwain, *Growth*, 391).<sup>a</sup> As Hegel said, the owl of Minerva starts its flight in the dusk: philosophy comes *always* too late for the *guidance* of political action; the philosopher *always* comes *post festum*; philosophy can merely *interpret* the result of political action; it can make us *understand* the State; it cannot teach us what should be *done* with regard to the State. One may wonder whether there are any significant political concepts, or ideas, which are the product of political philosophy: all political ideas seem to go back to political fighters, statesmen, lawyers, prophets. Would philosophers have spoken of mixed constitutions but for the fact that such constitutions had been devised by such nonphilosophic lawgivers as Lycurgus?<sup>36</sup> Would Montesquieu have taught in 1748 that the separation of executive, legislative, and judicial power is desirable but for the fact that such a separation had been effected, to a certain extent, in England by the Act of Settlement of 1701? What is the political philosophy of Plato and Aristotle but a reflection of the Greek political reality? The influence on political events of Alexander the Great is infinitely greater than that of his teacher Aristotle—and Alexander’s political activity is diametrically opposed to the principles laid down by Aristotle.

II. Now, even if we have no knowledge *of our own* to oppose to these arguments, we cannot help being impressed by an argument to the contrary which is taken from *authority*. If political philosophy is an evident failure, how is it understandable that quite a few men of superior intelligence were convinced that political philosophy is the necessary condition of the right order of civil society—or, to quote the most superior and the most famous

<sup>a</sup> Reference to Charles Howard McIlwain, *The Growth of Political Thought in the West, from the Greeks to the End of the Middle Ages* (New York: Macmillan, 1932).

of these men, that evils will not cease in the cities until the philosophers have become kings or the kings have become philosophers? Shall we say with Pascal that Plato's *Republic* was meant by Plato himself as a joke? It would certainly be rash to take this for granted. All the more so since Pascal himself continues his remarks on Plato's and Aristotle's political philosophies as follows: "They wrote on politics as if they were organizing an insane asylum; and they pretended to consider politics as something grand, because they knew that the madmen to whom they were talking believed themselves<sup>37</sup> to be kings and emperors. They accepted the assumptions of these madmen, in order to make their madness as harmless as might be." (*Pensées*, Brunschvicg, n. 331.)<sup>a</sup> Even according to Pascal, Plato and Aristotle *did* believe<sup>38</sup> that political philosophy is of *some* practical use.

III. Let us then consider first the second argument, which was to the effect that we can know without any political philosophy what should be done in the political field, as regards international policy, for example. Now, a reasonable policy, I take it, would be along these lines: human relations cannot become good if the human beings *themselves* do not become good first, and hence it would be a great achievement indeed if foundations for a peace lasting two generations could be laid, and hence the choice is not between imperialism and abolition of imperialism, but between the<sup>39</sup> tolerably decent imperialism of the Anglo-Saxon brand and the<sup>40</sup> intolerably indecent imperialism of the Axis brand. Such a policy, as we all know, is<sup>41</sup> by no means generally accepted; it is attacked not only by those who dislike the burden, and the responsibility, which go with a decent hegemony, but above all by a group of infinitely more generous political thinkers who deny the assumptions, implied in that reasonable policy, concerning human nature. If for no other purpose, at least in order to defend a reasonable policy against overgenerous or utopian thought, we would need a genuine political philosophy reminding us of the limits set to all human hopes and wishes. In other words, *even if it were true that man does not need political philosophy absolutely speaking, he does need political philosophy as soon as reasonable political action is endangered by an erroneous political teaching.* If Zeno

<sup>a</sup> Reference to Blaise Pascal, *Pensées* (Paris: Brunschvicg, 1897). The preceding portion of the text reads: "On ne s'imagine Platon et Aristote qu'avec de grandes robes de pédants. C'étaient des gens honnêtes et, comme les autres, riant avec leurs amis; et, quand ils se sont divertis à faire leurs Lois et leurs Politiques, ils l'ont fait en se jouant; c'était la partie la moins philosophe et la moins sérieuse de leur vie, la plus philosophe était de vivre simplement et tranquillement."

had not denied the reality of motion, it would not have been necessary to *prove* the reality of motion. If the sophists had not undermined the basic principles of political life, Plato might not have been compelled to elaborate his *Republic*. Or, to take another example, people would not have been willing to accept the policy of toleration which was the only way out of the religious wars and hatreds of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries if they had not become convinced by political philosophers that it was *not* their religious or moral duty to rebel against heretical governments; the political philosophers did not *inaugurate* the policy of toleration; *this* was done by reasonable statesmen, but these statesmen never would have succeeded but for the help of the political philosophers who enlightened public opinion.

These and similar examples merely show that political philosophy is necessary to *defend* a reasonable course of action which was discovered, and embarked upon, independently of political philosophy, against allegedly true political teachings which endanger that reasonable course of action; these and similar examples, I say, merely show the necessity of political philosophy as a sort of political *apologetic*. Such apologetics are evidently useful, and since they are bound to be backed by the politicians or statesmen whom they support, they are not necessarily ineffectual. The *difficulty* concerns political philosophy proper, which is not the *handmaid* of a reasonable policy, but its architect, as it were.

Let me put the question this way: Is it true that all significant political concepts or theses are the by-product of political life, or the work of statesmen, politicians, lawyers, prophets, and not of philosophers? For argument's sake, I will assume that it is true in all cases in which it could seem to<sup>42</sup> be true before one has sifted the evidence. There is certainly one fundamental political concept which is necessarily of philosophic origin, because its very conception is, so to speak, identical with the emergence of philosophy as such. This concept is the concept of *natural law* or *natural right*. For "nature" is *the* fundamental philosophic discovery. Truth, Being, even World, and all other terms designating the object of philosophy are unquestionably older than philosophy, but the first man who used the term "nature"—I think it was Odysseus or Hermes, the god of thieves, merchants, and Athenian democracy—was the first philosopher. The only contribution of philosophy to politics of which we can be absolutely certain is the concept of natural law or natural right, a law or right which is not made by man nor by gods, which has the same force everywhere, and which sets an absolute limit to human arbitrariness.

“Nature” was the first and decisive and, I think, the most unambiguous discovery of philosophy. But one does not understand the meaning of the term nature if one does not bear in one’s mind that from which nature is distinguished and to which it is opposed. If everything were nature or natural, nature would be a very empty concept. The men who discovered “nature” conceived of nature as the opposite of *convention* or *law*. Natural things, they observed, are everywhere the same, but the conventions vary from country to country, from city to city. Fire burns in Persia as well as in Greece, that fire burns is *necessary*; men are generated by men, and dogs by dogs—these things are *necessary*, but the laws concerning inheritance, theft, sacrifices, etc., are different in different countries and even in the same country at different times: these laws are essentially *arbitrary*, they are conventions. On the basis of that distinction the idea arose that it should be possible to discover such an order of life as is good and right *everywhere*, because it is in accordance with the one and unchangeable *nature* of *man*; this *natural* order is the only truly legitimate standard for judgments on the arbitrary enactments of monarchs and republics, and it is the only reliable guide for reform and improvement. Up to then, people had tacitly or expressly identified the good with the inherited or the old; from that moment, men began to *distinguish* the good from the old: “We are seeking the good, and not the old” (Aristotle).<sup>a</sup> With regard to this fact, we may say: philosophy is *the* antitraditional force; the liberation from the opinions of the past, the opening up of new vistas is, and always has been, of the essence of philosophy. As long as philosophy was living up to its own innate standard, philosophers as such, by their merely being philosophers, prevented those who were willing to listen to them from identifying *any actual* order, however satisfactory in many respects, with the *perfect* order: political philosophy is the eternal challenge to the philistine. There never has been and there never will be a time when this medicine administered by political philosophy has been and will be superfluous, although it must always be administered, as all medicine must, with discretion. This holds true in particular of our time; for in our time we are confronted not merely with the philistines of old who identify the good with the old or the actual, but with the philistines of progress who identify the good with the new and the future. But of this I shall have to speak somewhat later.

If it is true that the concept of a natural law, or of a natural order, is

<sup>a</sup> *Politics* 1269a4–5.



coeval with philosophy itself, we are justified in speaking of the legitimate utopianism inherent in philosophy as such. *This* utopianism is the very soul of Plato's and Aristotle's political philosophy, whose primary and guiding purpose is to discover that "constitution," that order of civil society, which is "natural." And this utopianism is *legitimate* because it is not *deceptive*: the philosophers I am speaking of call the perfect order of society an object of εὐχή, which means both wish and prayer; that perfect order is the object of the wish, or the prayer, of all *decent people*. Since it is acceptable, and meant to be acceptable, to decent people only, it is *not a theoretical* construction, but a *practical* ideal. By calling it candidly an object of wish or prayer, they left no doubt as to the gulf separating the ideal from reality; they considered that the realization of the ideal is a matter of *chance*, of lucky circumstances which may, or may not, arise. They did not make any *predictions*. While completely suspending their judgments concerning the *realization* of the ideal, they were definite as to the ideal itself: this ideal was, and was meant to be, the standard of sincere, uncompromising judgments on the real. The practical meaning of this utopianism was not, to repeat, to make any predictions as to the future course of events; it was merely to point out the direction which efforts of improvement would have to take. They did not seriously believe that the perfect order of society would ever become a reality, for being an object of wish or prayer, there is<sup>43</sup> no necessary reason why it should; but they felt that *any* actual order could bear improvement, *substantial* improvement. The relation of the ideal, or the utopia, to reality, as they conceived of it, may be described this way: there is a common, ordinary civil justice which consists in obedience to the law of the land and just administration of that law; that justice is not concerned with the justice of the law itself; it is for this reason a very imperfect justice, for every law, every legal order is bound to be only imperfectly just; therefore justice must be supplemented by *equity*, which is the correction of *legal* justice in the direction of perfect justice; the equitable order, or, as we might prefer to say, the order of charity is the utopian order; that utopian order by itself is essentially the object of *wish* or *prayer*, and not of political action; equity, or charity, by itself is<sup>44</sup> not able to subsist on this earth without the solid, somewhat brutal, imperfectly just, substructure of common justice; common justice must be "completed," corrected by considerations of equity or charity—it can never be supplanted by them, although all decent men would wish, or pray, that it could.

It is for this reason that traditional political philosophy, or moral philos-

ophy, frequently took on the form of exhortation, or moral advice. For if you do not believe that the perfect condition can be brought about by political action, you cannot hope for more than that one or the other of those in power might be induced, by moral appeal, by advice, by exhortations, by *sermons*, to do his best in his station along the lines of decency and humanity. This approach was underlying one special genre of political literature in particular, the mirrors of princes.

While mentioning the mirrors of princes, I have come to the great turning point in philosophy, to the starting point of the development in the course of which<sup>45</sup> the traditional utopianism of the philosophers and, we may add, of the theologians was gradually replaced by the *modern* utopianism of the *social engineer*. The mirrors of princes provoked the displeasure, the disgust, the passionate reaction of Machiavelli. Opposing the whole tradition of political philosophy, he did not wish to study any longer how men *ought* to behave, but how they *do* behave. He felt, not without good reason, that princes are not likely to listen to moral advice. From this he drew the conclusion, which no good man would have drawn, that he ought to teach princes how they could be efficient, if wicked. Machiavelli is the father of modern political philosophy, and<sup>46</sup> in particular of that trend of modern political philosophy which came into being as a *reaction* to his teaching. For very few philosophers were prepared to follow him on his dangerous course. The general trend was along these lines: people accepted Machiavelli's critique of the utopianism of the philosophic and theologic tradition; they admitted that the traditional ideals are too lofty to be put into practice; but, they argued, one cannot limit oneself to merely describing how men are and behave; men must be taught how they *should* be and behave. Thus a compromise between Machiavellianism and the tradition came into being: the idea to *lower* the traditional standard of conduct in order to *guarantee* the realization of these lower standards. Political philosophy attempted therefore to discover standards whose realization would be *necessary*, or automatic, and hence no longer an object of mere wish or prayer. The natural standard of human societies is the common good; the problem was to reconcile the common good, the common interest, with the private good, the private interest. The answer which was given was this: the common good is the object of *enlightened* self-interest; or virtue is identical with enlightened self-seeking. Accordingly, the primary task of political philosophy became to enlighten people about their self-interest. The idea was that the necessary outcome of general enlightenment about self-interest would be

that people would no longer interfere with that natural, automatic process which would bring about social harmony but for people's foolish interference with that process.

The guiding motive of all men—this is the “realistic,” “Machiavellian” assumption underlying this modern utopianism—is self-interest. Self-interest as we actually find it, unenlightened self-interest, necessarily leads to conflict, to the war of everyone against everyone, but this conflict is by no means necessary: everyone can be brought to realize that he would be better off in peace. What you have to do is to enlighten people about their self-interest: enlightened self-seekers will be as cooperative as unenlightened self-seekers are untractable. Enlightenment will gradually make superfluous the use of force.

The trouble with this idea, or rather the fallacy underlying this idea, is this: however enlightened a man may be about his self-interest, the object of his enlightened self-interest is not necessarily identical with the object of his strongest desires. This means the original conflict between moral demands and desires remains intact—it merely becomes much more difficult to cope with. For the conflict between moral demands and desires has its natural remedy, which is the appeal to sense of duty, honor, or however you might like to call it. The appeal to the enlightened self-interest necessarily lacks that moral sting. Enlightened self-interest requires as much sacrifice as justice itself—but the exclusive appeal to enlightened self-interest weakens the moral fibers of men and thus makes them unable to bring *any* sacrifice. Things become, not better and clearer, but worse and more confused, if self-interest is replaced by self-realization.

Another implication of this utopianism is the assumption that people really and basically want the object of their enlightened self-interest, that only lack of information prevents them from willing it. Actually, at least *some* people want *more*: power, precedence, dominion. And these dangerous people, even if few in number, are able to counteract the whole effort of enlightenment by employing<sup>47</sup> various devices, which sometimes are more effectual than the quiet voice of enlightening reason. What I am alluding to is the well-known fact that this modern utopianism naturally forgets the existence of the “forces of evil” and the fact that these forces cannot be fought successfully by enlightenment. We know a number of people who were honest enough to admit that they had forgotten the existence of evil; we can only hope that they will never do it again. One sometimes hears this kind of reasoning: during the last century, man has succeeded in conquering

nature; natural science has been amazingly successful; all the more striking, and all the more regrettable, is the failure of the social sciences; the failure of the social sciences to establish social harmony, when contrasted with the success of the natural sciences, appears paradoxical. But it *is* paradoxical on the basis of the modern utopianism only. For what is the human meaning of the success of the natural sciences? That man has become enormously more powerful than he has ever been. But does a man necessarily become a better, a nicer man by becoming more powerful?

Let us consider for one moment under what conditions it would be reasonable to say that man becomes better by becoming more powerful. This would be reasonable if all wickedness, nastiness, malevolence, aggressiveness were the outcome of<sup>48</sup> *want*. For as far as this is the case, one could make men better by satisfying their wants. This view is underlying the famous theory of frustration and aggression. The decisive fallacy expressed in this theory is the assumption that frustration is avoidable, that a life without some sort or other of frustration is possible at all, or that full satisfaction of wants is possible. I must try to explain this somewhat more fully.

The view that enlightened self-interest leads to public-spiritedness and even to social harmony, whereas only unenlightened self-interest leads to social conflict, is not altogether erroneous. The error creeps in as a consequence of the ambiguity of the term “wants.” Which are the wants whose satisfaction is the object of enlightened self-interest as distinguished from the object of unenlightened self-interest? Philosophers of former times used to distinguish between the necessary and the superfluous things. And they held that if all men were satisfied with the necessary things, with the *truly* necessary things, with what the body really and absolutely needs, the products of the earth would be sufficient to satisfy *these* wants without any fight among human beings becoming necessary. In other words, they held that the only guarantee of universal harmony is universal *asceticism*. Accordingly, they believed that the basic vice, the roots of all social conflict, is the desire for superfluous things, for *luxury*.<sup>a</sup> Now, one of the first actions of modern utopianism was the *rehabilitation* of luxury. It was assumed later on<sup>49</sup> that if all men were interested exclusively in raising their standard of living, their comfort, in the *commoda vitae*, social harmony would follow;

<sup>a</sup> [LS handwritten note] Plato's *Republic*—the true city, the healthy city, called by Glaucon the city of pigs—Glaucon is dissatisfied with the vegetarian food of the nice peaceful people—he gets his meat—and together with the meat: war.

it was assumed that the object of enlightened self-interest is, not the bare minimum of subsistence, but the highest possible standard of living. No sensible person can be unmindful of the great blessings which we owe to the victory of this tendency, but one is justified in doubting that it has brought about any higher degree of social harmony, or that it has brought us any nearer to universal peace. The number and the extension of the wars of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not sensibly smaller than the wars of earlier ages.

The curious thing about the present-day utopist is that he appears in the garb of the most hard-boiled realist. He does not speak of moral ideals—he speaks of economic problems, economic opportunities, and economic conflicts. He has learned in the meantime that mere enlightenment, that mere change of opinions would not do; he insists on the necessity of changing of institutions; he does not hesitate to recommend social revolution, unbloody<sup>50</sup> or otherwise. I am aware of *that*. Nevertheless, I must insist on the basic agreement between him and his grandfather of the eighteenth century.

No one will misunderstand me as if I were saying anything against economists. I still remember the papers read by Drs. Feiler and Marschak<sup>a</sup> in last year's summer course, papers which culminated in the thesis that the most important economic problems necessarily lead beyond the sphere of economics into the sphere of moral decisions.

But to come back to the trend of my argument, modern utopianism is not without good reason inseparable from economism as distinguished from economics. For modern utopianism ultimately rests on the identification of the common good with the object of enlightened self-interest understood as a high standard of living. The original thesis was that man *would* be determined by economic impulses, *if* he were enlightened, whereas actually he is determined by such foolish impulses as pride, prestige, etc. The next step was the assertion that man is in fact decisively determined by economic impulses and economic factors. The basic social or political facts are the economic facts: "the first private owner is the true founder of the State," "power goes with property." In its fully elaborated form, it is the economic interpretation of history which boasts of its more than Machiavellian realism, and which has nothing but contempt for the utopian socialism which it

<sup>a</sup> Arthur Feiler and Jacob Marschak were economists and colleagues of Strauss at the New School.

supplanted. But to say nothing of the withering away of the State, which will still be a matter of pious or impious hope <sup>a51</sup> long time after the withering away of Marxism will have been completed, what is more utopian than the implication of Marx's famous sentence: "Hitherto, the philosophers have limited themselves to *interpreting* the world; what matters is that the world be *changed*."<sup>a</sup> For why did the philosophers limit themselves to interpreting the world? Because they knew that the world in the precise, unmetaphoric sense of the term, the universe, cannot be changed by man. Marx's innocent-looking sentence implies the substitution of the little world of man for the real world, the substitution of the whole historical process for the real whole, which by making possible the whole historical process sets absolute limits to it. This substitution, a heritage from Hegel's idealistic philosophy, is the ultimate reason of Marx's utopian hopes. For is it not utopian to expect a *perfect* order of society which is essentially *perishable*? To expect men to put all their will, hope, faith, and love on something which is admittedly not eternal, but less lasting than this planet of ours? To mistake eternity for a time of very long duration, for some billions of years, is the privilege of nonphilosophic men, it is the mortal sin for a man who claims to be a philosopher. If all human achievements, the jump into liberty included, are not eternal, the germ of ultimate destruction will be noticeable even in the highest human achievements, and hence the so-called perfect order on earth is bound to be a delusion.

Much more realistic were the philosophers of old who insisted on the fact that the realization of the ideal is essentially a matter of chance, or the theologians of old<sup>52</sup> who insisted on the fact that the ways of providence are inscrutable to man. Modern utopianism is based on the assumption that the realization of the ideal is necessary, or almost necessary. By "almost necessary" I mean that but for an avoidable human shortcoming the ideal would necessarily be realized. The peak of modern utopianism was reached in the apparently least utopian political philosophy of the last centuries, in the political philosophy of Hegel. For, contrary to Plato and Aristotle and their followers who had insisted on the fundamental difference between the ideal and the real, the reasonable and the actual, Hegel declared that the reasonable is the actual and the actual is the reasonable.

A general survey of the history of political philosophy is apt to create the impression that there is no political philosophy from which we can

<sup>a</sup> "Theses on Feuerbach" XI.

learn anything because there is a disgraceful variety of political philosophies which fight each other to the<sup>53</sup> death. Deeper study shows that this impression is misleading. It would be absurd to say that deeper study shows us all political philosophers in perfect agreement; it does show us, however, that there was a tradition of political philosophy whose adherents were in agreement as regards the fundamentals, the tradition founded by Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, which was transformed but not broken under the influence of the biblical virtues of mercy and humility, and which still supplies us with the most needed guidance as regards the fundamentals. We do not need lessons from that tradition in order to discern the soundness of Churchill's approach, for example, but the cause which Churchill's policy is meant to defend would not exist but for the influence of the tradition in question.

This tradition is menaced today by a spurious utopianism. No one will deny that the basic impulse which generated that utopianism was generous. Nevertheless it is bound to lead to disaster because it makes us underestimate the dangers to which the cause of decency and humanity is exposed and always *will* be exposed. The foremost duty of political philosophy today seems to be to counteract this modern utopianism.

But to describe the service which political philosophy can render, not merely today, but at all times, one would have to say that political philosophy teaches us how terribly difficult it is to secure those minimums of decency, humanity, justice which have been taken for granted and are still being taken for granted in the few free countries. By enlightening us about the value of those apparently negligible achievements, it teaches us not to expect too much from the future. In the last analysis, political philosophy is nothing other than looking philosophically at things political—philosophically, i.e., *sub specie aeternitatis*. In thus making our hopes modest, it protects us against despondency. In thus making us immune to the smugness of the philistine, it makes us at the same time immune to the dreams of the visionary. Experience seems to show that common sense left to itself is not proof<sup>54</sup> against these faulty extremes: common sense requires to be fortified by political philosophy.

Man's modern venture, which has been amazingly successful in many respects, makes us distrustful of all teachings which insist on the fact that there are certain absolute limits to human progress: have not many of the allegedly existing limits proved to be surmountable? But the question is whether the price which had to be paid for these conquests was not, in some

cases, too high; in other words, whether it is not still true that man can indeed expel nature with a hayfork, but that nature will always come back with a vengeance.<sup>a</sup> By erecting the proud edifice of modern civilization, and by living within that comfortable building for some generations, many people seem to have forgotten the natural foundations, not dependent on human will and not changeable, which are buried deep in the ground and which set a limit to the possible height of the building.

In practical terms this means that the task before the present generation is to lay the foundations for a long peace period: it is *not*, and it cannot be, to abolish war for all times. To quote a great liberal of the last century, Henry Hallam: “the science of policy, like that of medicine, must content itself with devising remedies for immediate danger, and can at best only retard the progress of that intrinsic decay which seems to be the law of all things human, and through which every institution of man, like his earthly frame, must one day crumble into ruin.” (*Const. Hist.* 1182.)<sup>b</sup>

This sounds pessimistic or fatalistic, but it is not. Do we cease living, and living with reasonable joy, do we cease doing our best although we know with absolute certainty that we are doomed to die?

At the end of the third part of *King Henry VI*, after the victory of his house, King Edward IV says: “For here, I hope, begins our lasting joy.” All the commentary that is needed is implied in the fact that Edward’s brother Richard, afterward King Richard III, is silently present. At the end of *Richard III*, after that bloody tyrant has been slain, the victorious Henry VII concludes his speech by saying: “peace lives again: That she may long live here, God say amen!” The prudent Henry VII, the favorite of Bacon, was wiser than the ill-fated Edward IV. A wise man cannot say more than the father of Henry VIII did, and he cannot seriously *hope* for more. To what God did say amen after the victory of Henry VII is recorded in the histories.

It is hard to face these facts without becoming cynical, but it is not impossible. The philosophers advise us to love fate, stern fate. The Bible promises us God’s mercy. But the comfort which comes from God is as little pleasant to the flesh as is the love of fate. For the flesh which is weak wants tangible comfort. That tangible comfort—a man-made eternal peace

<sup>a</sup> Horace, *Epistles* i.x.24.

<sup>b</sup> Henry Hallam, *The Constitutional History of England from the Accession of Henry VII to the Death of George II* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1880).



and happiness—*non datur*. We have to choose between philosophy and the Bible.

## Notes

1. The schedule of the lectures was as follows:

July 10 Albert Salomon, "The Task of the Scholar"

July 17 Leo Strauss, "What Can We Learn from Political Theory?"

July 24 Erich Hula, "Planning for World Order"

July 31 Adolph Lowe, "What Can We Learn from the British War Effort?"

Aug. 7 Arthur Feiler, "The Problem of Demobilization"

Aug. 14 Felix Kaufmann and Paul Schrecker, "Problems in Social Science"

Compiled on the basis of the catalogues available at [http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS050101\\_gfi942sp](http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/NS050101_gfi942sp) (accessed April 27, 2016).

2. *NRH*, 3–5.
3. *NRH*, 34.
4. He alludes here to Julien Benda's *La trahison des clercs* (Paris: Grasset, 1927), translated into English as *The Treason of the Intellectuals*, trans. Richard Aldington, introduction by Roger Kimball (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 2007).
5. *NRH*, 150.
6. *NRH*, 162.
7. *Ibid.*
8. *NRH*, 164.
9. *NRH*, 258.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *NRH*, 321.
12. *NRH*, 320–21.
13. On the traditional (Aristotelian) division of the sciences and the implications of its denial compare *LAM*, 205–6.
14. This definition should be compared with those in *WIPP*, 10–12 and 93–94. Passages in "On Classical Political Philosophy" also suggest that the primary concern of classical political philosophy was the right guidance not the understanding of political life (*WIPP*, 88).
15. Strauss makes this distinction more fully in *WIPP*, 12–13.
16. Compare *LAM*, 206. In the chapter on Aristotle's *Politics* in *CM*, Strauss first avers that the sphere ruled by prudence is closed by principles fully evident only to gentlemen and its ends are known independently of theoretical science (25), but then concedes that the natural end of man becomes genuinely known through theoretical science (26) and the practical sphere is not unqualifiedly closed to theoretical science (28). This discussion is conducted, however, within the Aristotelian framework that considers theory to be physics and metaphysics rather than political philosophy. Strauss contrasts

that view with the view of Plato and Aristotle that “philosophy as prudence is the never-to-be-completed concern for one’s own good” (29).

17. *NRH*, 320.

18. I discussed some possible contemporary implications of Strauss’s presentation of these policies in “Will the Real Leo Strauss Please Stand Up?” in *American Interest* 2, no. 1 (September/October 2006): 120–28.

19. Compare *NRH*, 13 and 151.

20. *NRH*, 177–79.

21. Here Strauss writes of lowering the standards of conduct, whereas later he wrote of modernity lowering the goals. He himself in a sense recommends lowering the goals in this lecture, e.g., not aiming at the abolition of war or imperialism.

22. Compare *CM*, 5: “no bloody or unbloody change of society can eradicate the evil in man: as long as there will be men, there will be malice, envy and hatred.” Similarly, Strauss writes in *WIPP* that classical political philosophy is “free from all fanaticism because it knows that evil cannot be eradicated and therefore that one’s expectations from politics must be moderate” (28).

23. Strauss does not explicitly respond to the part of the first negative argument that maintains that philosophy is at best only clear knowledge of the problems, not of the solutions. It is worth noting that Strauss himself makes such statements later, e.g., *NRH*, 125, and *WIPP*, 11, 39, 116.

24. Most manifestly in the sections on Weber and Locke, *NRH*, 74–76 and 202–20.

25. “making” was crossed out and “choosing” inserted by hand.

26. “theory” was underlined by hand.

27. “Originally” was crossed out and “Formerly” inserted by hand.

28. “distinction” was x’ed out and “division” typed above it.

29. “your” was underlined by hand.

30. “it” was inserted by hand.

31. “hence” was crossed out by hand.

32. Under the term “philosophy” the word “thought” was x’ed out and vice versa, both in typing.

33. “is” was crossed out and “exists” handwritten.

34. “themselves” was crossed out and “itself” handwritten.

35. This parenthetical sentence was added by hand.

36. This sentence was added by hand at the bottom of the page.

37. We have added the word “themselves” to Strauss’s direct translation from the French edition.

38. The word “then” before “believe” was crossed out by hand.

39. “a” was crossed out and “the” handwritten.

40. “a” was crossed out and “the” handwritten.

41. “is” was inserted by hand, replacing the “is” typed and crossed out after “Such a policy is.”

42. “seem to” was typed above the line.

43. “is” handwritten replaced “was” crossed out.

44. We changed from “by themselves are.”

45. Strauss replaced "point when" with "starting point of the development in the course of which."
46. "and" was handwritten.
47. "employing" was handwritten.
48. "of" was handwritten.
49. "later on" was handwritten.
50. "bloody" was x'ed out and "unbloody" typed above the line.
51. We have inserted the word "a" before "long time."
52. We have changed from "the old."
53. We have inserted the word "the" before "death."
54. "a sufficient guarantee" was crossed out.